What Works. The Work Program is a set of resources designed to help schools and those who work in them improve outcomes for Indigenous students. The ‘Core issues’ series is an attempt to distil some topic-based key directions for practical action.

Improved transition – improved outcomes

Each Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student’s educational pathway is marked by key transitions. This Core Issues Paper provides a general framework for schools to enhance the effectiveness of these transitions.

The framework includes a goal that applies to all transitions: *each Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student to be socially, emotionally and cognitively prepared and ready for the next stage of his or her educational or post-school pathway.*

Three broad components of ‘readiness’ complete the framework – *school* readiness, *student* readiness, and *family and community* readiness for transition. Schools working in partnership with parents, families and community, can act to improve readiness at the various transitions Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students experience: entering into, progressing through, and exiting school.
The importance of transition

The well-documented gaps between the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and other students emerge early. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in their first year of school are more likely to be identified as being developmentally vulnerable in the five domains measured by the Australian Early Development Index (AEDI). The five AEDI domains – physical health and wellbeing, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive skills (school-based), communication skills and general knowledge – are closely linked to the predictors of good adult health, education and social outcomes.

The gaps that emerge early can accumulate through schooling. By Year 3 there is a gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and other students on the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) tests. Year 5, 7 and 9 NAPLAN data suggest that the constraints on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ development continue into later years of schooling.

As a result, planning for transition is an important piece in the closing the gap jigsaw. Its importance is recognised in the national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan 2010–2014 (ATSIEAP), with two of its six national priorities directly related to transitions. One is readiness for school; another is pathways to real post-school options.

Transitions

Each Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student’s educational pathway from birth to post-school destination is marked by numerous stages of learning. Entry into school, year level to year level transition, movement from primary to secondary school, and exiting school are usual transitions. Non-routine enrolments and exits add other transition points for many students.

Some contexts present particular challenges for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. For example, the move from a remote primary setting to a secondary school in a different geographical location. Student mobility is another. A further challenge is highlighted in the transition issues facing students...
who move each term from their traditional home environments to the environment of a complex Western school environment.

Each transition stage presents risks of varying degrees for every student. A general risk is that lack of preparation and readiness for the next stage potentially means lost progress and development, loss that is difficult to make up over time. For those students particularly at risk of disengagement from schooling, each transition can contribute to the accumulating factors that may result in a gradual withdrawal from schooling.

**Role of the school**

Schools can influence student readiness at each transition. For example, while increased access to early childhood education is important in developing a child’s school readiness, a 2012 study found that ‘controlling for prior pre-school participation eliminated only a small part of the difference between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and other students observed on the AEDI indicators’ (Biddle and Cameron 2012). The conclusion is that a range of other factors can affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ readiness for this key transition, and others. Schools have a role to act on those factors that they can either control or influence, to build Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student, family and school readiness at the various transitions.

Many schools use transitions as opportunities to understand the origins of lack of progress, absence, disengagement and other issues that affect a smooth transition. Two key features of schools that are successful in transition outcomes are partnerships and personalisation. Identifying factors that influence transition means schools can work in partnership with parents and families to intervene and address those factors, enhance readiness for the next stages of schooling, and build prospects that the gap will be closed. Schools, in partnership with the student’s parents or carers, can map a pathway to achieve goals tailored to the individual’s developmental and motivational needs.

**Case study: Achieving their dreams, Dawul Remote Community School (RCS)**

Dawul RCS is located 110km southwest of Kununurra, WA, on Doon Doon station. The population of Doon Doon varies, with an average of 90 people and the school usually has 100 per cent Aboriginal student population. Most students and community members speak Aboriginal English or Kimberley Kriol and the students are competent Standard Australian English (SAE) speakers. A LOTE and Culture program is well established in the school, introducing students to the local Woolah language. The community is supportive of the school and there is a high level of student attendance. Parents and community members are regular attendees at school community meetings, assemblies and workshops. Often families will travel between Doon Doon, Warmun, Wyndham and Halls Creek. Consequently truancy is not a problem but itinerancy can be. The school caters for students ranging from Kindergarten to secondary school.

Over the past five years, students at Dawul RCS have demonstrated consistently sound performances in NAPLAN. In the same period, there has been a trend for secondary students to attend boarding school, but many return to Dawul within the year. Whilst enrolment at another school is often attempted after a period of time back in the community, this also tends to be unsuccessful. A number of young people on their return to the community, become disengaged from school, and are reluctant to access services to obtain further education and training. Therefore, despite students completing primary school at Dawul RCS with levels comparable to state norms, low rates of secondary graduation suggested there were barriers to successful schooling other than academic competence.

The decision to focus on transition emerged from extensive school and community consultations. An initial meeting of four community members and the principal identified school governance, transition to secondary school, numeracy and literacy outcomes as challenges and four possible action areas. A follow-up community meeting decided that, while all challenges were important, transition would be a focus as literacy and numeracy outcomes had been good. At a later Stronger continued overleaf....
Smarter workshop the school and community discussed "what makes us strong?" and ‘what are our next steps?’. The majority of parents and staff talked about the need to prepare the students so that they would be better equipped for high school. Transition is now recognised in revisions to the Dawul School Community Partnership Agreement (SCPA). The SCPA’s shared vision now reads ‘We want our students to grow up strong and confident to achieve their dreams and goals’. This long-term goal is to be achieved through strategies including; developing individual pathway plans, improving communication between boarding schools/hostels, families and the community school, and developing partnerships with service providers to support the high school students with their career pathway planning.

Various meetings and consultations were used to identify these strategies for smoother transitions from primary school to secondary school and then from secondary school to work or further training. A school community workshop identified community groups, external services and potential employer groups who were or could support the school, young people and the Doon Doon community. A further meeting with all staff, parents, the Regional Participation Co-ordinator and the Regional Aboriginal Education Manager discussed strategies that could be employed to have smoother transitions from primary school to secondary school and then from secondary school to work or further training.

Interviews with past students of Dawul RCS aged 16 to 29 years, some of whom are parents of current students, identified homesickness or ‘fighting’ as significant issues during secondary school experiences. A Years 6/7 camp has proven very effective in giving students and parents experiences and exposure to different training institutions and career options to help them make informed decisions.

A tracking tool has been developed to provide an overview of students’ transitions to secondary school. Data collected through the tool has been useful in identifying common findings in relation to students’ secondary school experiences.

These include:
- trends in relation to the time period when students are most likely to return to the community due to issues related to boarding
- timing of short term programs and training initiatives attracting Doon Doon students back to the community
- reasons why students leave boarding school and don’t return and/or why students drop out of school altogether.

A process and proforma for developing individualised educational/vocational pathway plans have been developed. One-to-one conferencing occurs with students and their parents/guardians during this process. Key considerations in each student’s plan include:
- identifying and reviewing each student's academic and vocational life goals
- primary/secondary transition planning commencing in Year 5, based around a case management model for each student
- exploration of lower secondary options
- consideration of upper secondary to workplace/training
- need for family support and circumstances.

Key issues identified for future consideration and action in relation to the implementation of the project include:
- enterprise education – skills needed such as business planning etc
- potential for partnerships
- issues with scholarships ... ‘there are resources in our region why do we need to look interstate?’

The project has seen strong links formed with various community, school, training, employers, employment, training and health groups that can be accessed to build stronger transitions.
A transition goal

A review of literature and school practice related to various transitions reveals that while language and developmental emphasis can differ some key concepts are common to all. One of these is student readiness. A ‘ready’ student is one who has the capacities enabling them to successfully participate in their next stage of schooling, or their post-school destination. Ready students possess a balanced range of competencies across various broad dimensions.

Dockett, Perry & Kearney suggest in the National Closing the Gap Clearinghouse issues paper on school readiness (2010) that at school entry, five general dimensions represent these capacities of student readiness:

• physical wellbeing
• social and emotional development
• approaches to learning
• language development
• cognition and general knowledge.

These broad dimensions can be applied to other transitions, although expressed through different language. For example, the Australian Early Years Learning Framework provides measures for early childhood development. The Australian Curriculum identifies learning area content knowledge, cross-curriculum priorities and seven general capabilities students require to be ready for the 21st century. A national set of eight employability skills is relevant for post-school destinations. The Australian Blueprint for Career Development provides a framework of the skills, attitudes and knowledge individuals need to make sound choices about their careers.

Although the detail within each of the five dimensions does change, with more specialised knowledge and skills required for readiness, the further a student’s pathway progresses, there is a good understanding of the balance of capacities required for a student to be ready for her or his next stage. As a result it is possible to construct a common goal, expressed in terms of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student outcomes, which can be applied to each transition.

This goal emphasises the continuity of a student’s learning and development as the purpose of transition. Emphasising continuity recognises that building on a student’s strengths, prior experiences, development and achievements helps them to feel confident and ready for their new stage. The goal also implies that schools need to be able to measure a student’s current social, emotional and cognitive development and plan for improvement in these domains.

‘Readiness’

Schools can influence transition outcomes by working on three components of readiness – student, school and parent/family/community readiness. The three form the
basis for an integrated strategic approach to achieving the transition goal. In reality, the three components are interrelated and schools are most effective when all three are addressed coherently through a partnership between parents, teachers and students. A transition theory of action might be expressed as: if we build student, school and family readiness for transition through partnerships, then each Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student will be prepared for the next stage of his or her educational pathway.

The specific strategies that a school might design to achieve the transition goal will vary according to a range of contextual factors, the pathway stage and the particular needs of the student cohorts the school is working with.

### Enhancing readiness

‘Ready schools’ are synonymous with flexible, adaptable, supportive environments, guided by strong leadership and positive relationships, that are responsive to the children attending and facilitate family engagement and connections with local prior-to-school settings and the broader community (Dockett, Perry & Kearney, 2010).

Schools can use three groups of strategies to enhance readiness. The first two are related to general school culture and readiness for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. The third group is the specific transition programs that schools design to prepare students and develop their readiness for the next stage of learning. This latter group involves working in partnership with students and their family and community.

A school is ‘ready’ when:

- it has an environment and culture that offers support and challenge for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students
- it is a welcoming place that recognises the importance of school–parent/family–community partnerships
- it is culturally responsive.

‘Ready’ schools also require ‘ready’ teachers and support staff. Authentic partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and community enhance ‘readiness’ for transition.
student-focused strategies that directly meet the needs of students at risk of low achievement or early leaving. (Helme and Lamb 2011)

School culture

A school culture that creates a positive, welcoming and challenging environment is a cornerstone to successful transition. What Works extensive experience working in schools across the nation has highlighted some fundamental characteristics of school culture that are related to improved Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student outcomes.

What Works experience and research projects also show that school leadership, especially that of the principal, performs a critical role in improving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student outcomes. Strong leadership contributes to more effective transition.

A strengths-based approach to transition

A 2012 ACER report, Starting School: A strengths-based approach towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, describes important considerations for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children’s transition to formal learning. Many of these considerations are also appropriate for other transitions. They include:

- recognising and valuing the presence of the protective factors which contribute to building resilient young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (shared activities, family support, strong cultural identity, health, positive self-identity)
- supporting teachers in gaining a better understanding of the cultural knowledge their students bring to school – for example, through cross cultural training or mentoring
- acknowledging and honouring cultural identity and diversity and incorporating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander standpoints into the curriculum
- recognising the skills and expertise that exist in the community to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, and making the school culturally safe and welcoming for parents and carers and community members
- scaffolding activities so that there is a logical and supported progression from an existing skill to a new one.
- approaching strengths as dynamic qualities that can be developed over time rather than as static elements that receive short-term or intermittent attention
- developing resources and activities that reinforce the knowledge and understandings and skills that already exist in children.
- developing appropriate assessments that reflect a strengths-based approach, in which children can experience success, show what they can do, learn from what they cannot yet do, grow in confidence and look forward to the next challenge that is presented
- having high expectations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students
- acknowledging and embracing Aboriginal leadership in schools and school communities
- being prepared to use innovative and dynamic school and staffing models in complex social and cultural contexts.

(Armstrong, et al 2012)
Whole school approaches

The second sub-group of school level strategies includes whole school frameworks designed to influence all students’ engagement, motivation, connectedness, and as a result, educational outcomes.

They include:

- agreed approaches to teaching and learning
- curriculum appropriate to the stage of learning
- positive relationships and student management programs
- a culture of data use.

Effective schools use these whole-school frameworks to guide and support teacher practice and build accountability for improved Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student outcomes.

One example is the use of consistent approaches to classroom teaching shown to influence Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student learning, for example, the use of data and feedback, cultural responsiveness and explicit teaching. Such approaches to teaching and learning are designed to enhance student cognitive, emotional and behavioural engagement. The use of data in this manner also assists in developing student Personalised Learning Plans.

Another characteristic of schools that have demonstrated sustained improvement in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student outcomes is whole-school approaches to positive relationships among all stakeholders, in particular between teachers and students. The observation is consistent with findings of an ACER (2010) report on contextual factors that influence the achievement of Australia’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. This report suggests ‘a supportive environment, which includes a climate characterised by high expectations and positive teacher-student relations, can be a positive influence on students’ performance, whereas disruptive behaviour and negative attitudes towards school may not only be associated with low academic performance, but may also factor in the decision to withdraw from school.’
• provide access to career services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their families to support informed career and study choices.
• maximise opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students under School Business Community Partnerships to extend learning beyond the classroom, increase student engagement, deepen learning experiences and improve educational outcomes.

Transition programs

The previous two groups of strategies promote school readiness and provide a sound general basis for transition. Transition programs focus specifically on achieving the goal of each student being socially, emotionally and cognitively prepared and ready. As a result a first consideration for designing transition programs is for a school to measure a student’s stage of development on these domains and then use the information to plan for the particular transition. Schools therefore need to be data literate, that is, have an effective data collection process and the capacity to use that data. Schools also need processes to gather information from teachers, other school staff, parents, students and members of the broader community about the factors contributing to a student’s progress to improved transition, retention and engagement.

Transition programs need to be well planned and led for them to be effective. They need to:

- provide innovative and tailored learning opportunities, mentoring and targeted case management strategies to increase the retention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to Year 12.
- provide pathways and improved access to school-based accredited training, including traineeships and apprenticeships, for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in Years 10–12.
- provide case management for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students undertaking school-based traineeships and link them to employment services.

Dockett, Perry & Kearney (2010) highlight some whole school approaches shown to be effective for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student transition into primary school. These include having quality teaching and learning, curriculum and pedagogy that uses culturally appropriate approaches—including children’s home languages and recognition of cultural ways of knowing, smaller class sizes and providing necessary supports for children.

At the secondary schooling stage Helme and Lamb (2011) report that school-wide strategies that work to maintain Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student engagement and improve learning outcomes include broad curriculum provision, quality vocational education and training (VET) options, school absenteeism and attendance programs, pathways planning and quality career education.

These are reflected in the ATSIEAP requirement that secondary schools need to:

- provide access to career services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their families to support informed career and study choices.
- maximise opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students under School Business Community Partnerships to extend learning beyond the classroom, increase student engagement, deepen learning experiences and improve educational outcomes.

Whole school strategies that support transition

- Effective data collection processes
- Agreed and consistently applied approaches to classroom teaching and learning based on the use of data
- Learning content that is engaging, accessible and culturally responsive, for example, culture inclusion programs
- Early intervention to support literacy and numeracy development
- Processes that include, support and engage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students
- Whole school approaches to positive relationships
- School absenteeism and attendance programs
- Use of Personalised Learning Plans, pathways planning and quality career education
- Broad curriculum provision in senior secondary years either at the school or through other arrangements
- Quality vocational education and training (VET) options
- School organisation to enhance engagement, wellbeing and learning
- Project-based learning programs in secondary school
- Opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to extend learning beyond the classroom and into the world of work
• have a clear purpose
• focus on the three components of readiness
• emphasise continuity of student’s learning and development
• use supportive practices that are understood by all parties
• have processes in place to include and support all those involved
• have effective leadership and planning.

Key elements of this include ensuring information is passed on to teachers and facilitating student experience of the routines and expectations in their new settings.

Above all, transition programs must be personalised and developed through a partnership between the school, the student and the parents. Personalised approaches map a pathway for students to achieve goals tailored to their developmental and motivational needs. The use of data is important for effectively targeting transition programs. Data can be used to develop Personalised Learning Plans (PLPs). PLPs describe a clear destination for the student in terms of goals for learning. They identify the potential obstacles that might impede a student achieving their goals, and chart a course through them. In addition to PLPs, other personalised student plans can be used. These are generally designed to map pathways at the various transition points during schooling, for example, on entry to school. Career type plans are called career, transition, pathways or aspirational plans depending on the system. Behaviour management plans are another form of plan developed for individual student circumstances. Many schools combine the various plans into one that has clear short and longer term goals related to learning, and in secondary settings, career aspirations and post-school pathways.

Communication and relationship building are focal points for effective transition. Successful schools engage parents and carers directly, ensure they are comfortable with the school environment and make use of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Education Officers to support transition. Personal contact is a priority, for these schools, taking the form of home visits, phone calls and invitations to events, individual family and student letters and school newsletters to keep families informed. In many schools, each teacher has responsibility for talking with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents or carers throughout the transition process, ensuring the process focuses on the positive aspects of the child’s development. Goals and focus areas are negotiated and agreed upon by all stakeholders.

In many circumstances schools need to address transition issues for students moving backward and forward each term from their traditional home environments to the environment of a complex Western school. Perso, Kenyon & Darrough (2012) highlight ‘the need for schools of the dominant culture to explicitly provide culturally responsive support during transition times, such as the start of term or semester in order to make the process as seamless as possible for students.’ Such approaches establish clear expectations for students and help staff understand ‘the difficulties faced by their students in regularly confronting different cultural, linguistic and social expectations imposed by the school and in classrooms.’

Examples of transition programs

→ Working in collaboration with previous teachers, for example:
  • Using the Australian Early Development Framework to promote development and readiness.
  • Reciprocal visits – for educators and teachers to visit each other’s environment to participate in meetings, joint teaching, transition planning.
  • Transition statements and meetings. Written information about a student’s learning and development jointly prepared by teachers, families and the student to be passed on to the new teacher.
  • Joint professional development. Training/ information sessions or more formalised professional development between early childhood services and schools, and as appropriate at other transition points.
  • Meetings among teachers to discuss student development and readiness.
  • Development of portfolios that demonstrate students’ work and current level of development.

→ Providing opportunities for students to begin developing relationships with teachers prior to starting the next stage, for example, reciprocal visits for children

→ Providing opportunities for students to begin developing relationships with other students, for example, buddy programs

→ Providing students with opportunities for prior experience of new environments, routines and classrooms

→ Involving family and community in communication strategies, partnership meetings, play groups and new mothers’ clubs hosted by the school

→ Learning and pathway plans, for example, use of portfolios for mapping and supporting intensive, individualised transition processes
Planning for transition

*What Works. The Workbook* provides a set of tools and ideas to help schools plan to achieve improved outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. The planning process and templates contained in the Workbook can be used for developing transition programs. The planning process, applicable to transition, is shown in Figure 2. The Workbook support materials for taking action and working systematically in schools are located at www.whatworks.edu.au > Publications > The Workbook.

**FIGURE 2: TRANSITION PLANNING PROCESS**

- Establishing a team and a leader
- Taking stock
- Establishing goals and targets
- Selecting strategies
- Establishing a plan
- Celebrations

**Case study: Cultural tensions**

Perso, Kenyon and Darrough (2012) report on the success of a transition program at a Northern Territory school consisting of a boarding facility, a middle school, and a senior College. The school draws on a student cohort that includes students from four states and territories, aged from 11 to 17, from urban and remote homes, with different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, a broad range of social and health issues, and a complex and wide variety of student educational experiences, including school readiness. The report describes the following details of the school transition program:

"Prior to introduction of the transition program, boarding students would commence classes the day after they arrived at the school, having spent much of the previous day travelling from all over the country. The boarders had difficulty settling in and teachers of boarders found it difficult to manage the students’ behaviours, and the Term 1 suspension rate was traditionally high. Teachers complained about boarding students demonstrating poor behaviours in and out of class, and the costs to the school of sending suspended students home was unsustainable. There was general acknowledgement that something needed to be done. The report describes the role performed by various staff:

‘A teacher, Miss P, and her senior years colleague met with the five Indigenous Education Workers (IEWs) on the school staff to discuss what might be done. They recognised that the issue had its roots in the transition from home to school. Moreover, for the students, it was the school that was the problem because it wasn’t like home. This in itself demonstrated great insight; there was no blame on students not being able to fit in but instead a realisation that it was the school that needed to support the students to make the expected transition into a different environment.’

‘Miss P recognised that the students needed to be explicitly taught the behaviours expected by the school and teachers. She believed that it was no wonder that the students were not meeting the teachers’ expectations when they didn’t know what the expectations were. Miss P initiated a discussion with the school leadership team about a possible ‘Transition program that would support the students to safely negotiate the transition from home to school. It was agreed that a three-day program would be developed for boarders at the start of Term. … The program, is held at the start of each semester for all new boarders with a slightly modified version for long-time boarders.’

The authors report that the Transition program has proved highly successful. Tensions around differing expectations are addressed and data indicate that the implementation of the program has resulted in a significant reduction in student misbehaviours leading to suspension."
Parent, family and community readiness

Schools have a key role to play during transition including reaching out and working in partnership with parents and carers. Assisting parents and carers to support their children’s social and emotional skills will not only be beneficial during the transition to school, but will also provide children with skills that support their mental health in the short and long term. In order to reach and involve as many parents and carers as possible, consideration should be given to potential barriers to participation and how these can be addressed. Hirst, M., Jervis, N., Visagie, K., Sojo, V. & Cavanagh, S. (2011)

Research shows that when schools and families and communities work in partnership, students get better results. Parents/carers are the first and foremost teachers in a child’s life and have an ongoing direct influence on outcomes. Families who actively support their children during transition to school, and build positive relationships with staff, are likely to continue their positive engagement with school. This in turn supports children’s longer-term positive engagement with school.

A broad strategy is to engage in two-way dialogue with families and community during transition to create a shared vision and agreed ways of achieving it.

Examples of student level strategies

- Student case management
- Mentoring
- Wellbeing support
- Targeted assistance for skill development among low achievers
- Tutoring and peer tutoring, homework clubs
- Supplementary/out-of-school-time programs
- Pathways planning and Personalised Learning Plans for at-risk students
- Targeted financial support
- Project-based learning for disengaged students
- Programs to improve students’ social skills

A critical transition in remote areas is the move from primary to secondary schooling. This often involves a move from the local community to another area, placing students in a high-risk transition. Planning for such a move requires intensive thought and support.

Helme and Lamb (2011) point to research that identifies student-focused strategies that directly meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students at risk of low achievement or early leaving. These strategies include targeted skill development, mentoring, school engagement programs, wellbeing support and intensive case management. While their report refers to a secondary schooling context, many of the principles and practices are also appropriate to other levels of schooling.

Parent, family and community strategies

- Incorporating transition into School Community Partnership Agreements
- Conferencing about personalised plans
- Identifying a shared transition vision and building an atmosphere of working together to achieve it
- Identifying community leaders who can support and develop cohesion within the community
- Creating a locally relevant shared action plan that identifies how community members will work towards achieving the vision
- Communicating key messages and action plans to the broader community so everyone knows what is happening and how to get involved
- Implementing programs that encourage mothers with young children to be involved in the school, for example, play groups
- Recognising the special effort of individuals who make a positive contribution to the community’s transition-to-school experiences
- Being welcoming and inclusive to all, celebrating diversity and developing culturally appropriate practices
- Providing a private meeting room for parents and offering support with venues for network meetings, family support groups, etc
- Having family fun days
- Taking the school/learning into the community

Specific intervention strategies

School transition programs will get most students ‘ready’. However, some at-risk Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students face a variety of social and personal matters that will affect engagement, the quality of learning and transition. Individual-level interventions include programs that attempt to directly address the individual or group needs of at-risk students. The provision of strategic, targeted wellbeing and skill programs can have a substantial effect on the capacity of at-risk students to benefit from transition and ultimately remain in education. These strategies are really an extension of the personalised approaches to transition for all students.
Case study: ‘I’ve learned to adapt to and embrace the change of setting’

An interview with a Year 12 student who moved interstate from Broken Hill to a metropolitan boarding school in Year 7.

Question 1
Why did you choose this school for secondary education?
Honestly, I didn’t choose to come to this school by myself. I was mainly influenced by my parents, though I kind of knew that they were trying to assist me by giving me the opportunity to a better education. As they would say; they wanted to give me the education that they didn’t get the opportunity to have when they were growing up.

Question 2
What were some of the things you were concerned about when getting ready for the transition?
I had a brother that left for boarding school off in Geelong a few years before me, so I thought that it would be pretty smooth sailing when it was my time to head off. As it got closer and closer to the time though, I did end up getting nervous. I started worrying about the small things. What if I didn’t like the food? What if the kids there were mean? What if the teachers are mean or they teach at a difficult level?

Nowadays, I don’t even have to think about these issues. I guess I’ve learned to adapt to and embrace the change of setting.

Question 3
What help did you get to prepare for the move to a new school?
Leading up to the move, I started asking more questions about the school from my brother and my parents. My brother just kept telling me that it was great. I had my doubts of course, but I guess he was right in the end.

Question 4
What were the biggest challenges when you got to the school?
I’m not going to lie... When I got there, I was pretty shocked. I still remember approaching the school for the first time. That’s when I started to get butterflies. I was there with my parents, and we took a small tour of the place, met people and unpacked my stuff. When they left, I was really, really shocked. I had to take care of myself, and the little things that were required of independence became known to me. I had to organise my own homework, get my own clothes ready, manage my own laundry and most importantly, do it all by myself.

I guess the idea of getting into the whole routine at school whilst juggling homesickness had been the biggest challenge of it all. I was worrying for the first week or so, but I ended up realising that there were other people in the same boat. Sure, I was probably the only Indigenous person, but there were other people coping with homesickness. I put it into perspective too: I wasn’t judged at this new school, since everyone here were from different parts of the world, and it was a culturally diverse place.

Most of my concerns slid as I moved into the routine of school and made new friends, though it is important to acknowledge it, since I did have to face it at one point of my transition, as do the large proportion of others in the same situation.

Question 5
What’s been the best thing about the transition to a new school?
I ended up liking the transition into this new school and there were easily a lot of good points about it. Growing up, I’d never moved schools before, and this had been my first transition into a school since the start of primary school. One of the major high-points was making new friends. I remember some other guys in my boarding house that had shared the same feeling of being out of place back when we were all new to the school. Five years down the track, I still have and value these friendships. These experiences and things I have learned will probably maintain throughout the rest of my life. The best part now is that I now have this feeling of just how lucky I am to have ever had these opportunities and experiences that I can now look back to reflect on and hopefully encourage others to take up and make the most out of similar opportunities.
## A transition checklist

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<th>Actions</th>
<th>Transition point</th>
<th>Not evident</th>
<th>Could be improved</th>
<th>Working well</th>
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<td><strong>Clear goals</strong></td>
<td>A goal that describes measurable outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.</td>
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<td><strong>Effective data collection</strong></td>
<td>Effective data collection process to accurately identify a student’s current levels of social, emotional and cognitive development.</td>
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<td>Capacity to use data to plan for transitions.</td>
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<td>Processes to gather and use information and feedback about the factors contributing to a student’s readiness.</td>
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<td><strong>School culture</strong></td>
<td>Agreed positive core beliefs about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ capacity to learn and achieve.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Understanding the importance of school–family–community partnerships.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their cultures.</td>
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<td><strong>Whole-school approaches</strong></td>
<td>Agreed and consistently applied approaches to classroom teaching.</td>
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<td>Make learning content engaging, accessible and culturally responsive, for example, culture inclusion programs.</td>
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<td>Early intervention to support literacy and numeracy development.</td>
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<td>Processes that include, support and engage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.</td>
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<td>Whole-school approaches to positive relationships.</td>
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<td>School absenteeism and attendance programs.</td>
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<td>Use of Personalised Learning Plans, pathways planning and quality career education.</td>
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<td>Broad curriculum provision in senior secondary years either at the school or through other arrangements.</td>
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<td><strong>School transition programs</strong></td>
<td>Effective leadership and planning.</td>
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<td>Agreed evidence-based practice.</td>
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<td>Targeted strategies and actions.</td>
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<td>Culturally responsive.</td>
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<td>Effective communication.</td>
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<td>Inclusion of relevant people involved and building their capacity.</td>
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<td><strong>Student level strategies</strong></td>
<td>Student case management, mentoring.</td>
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<td>Wellbeing support/targeted financial support.</td>
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<td>Targeted assistance for skill development among low achievers, eg, tutoring and peer tutoring, homework clubs.</td>
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<td>Programs to improve students’ social skills.</td>
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<td><strong>Family and community strategies</strong></td>
<td>Shared transition vision to work towards.</td>
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<td>Build an atmosphere of working together to achieve the vision.</td>
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<td>Identify and use community leaders who can support transition.</td>
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<td>Locally relevant and shared action plan that identifies how all those involved will work towards achieving the vision.</td>
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<td>Communication of the key messages and action plan to the broader community.</td>
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<td>Programs that encourage parental and family involvement.</td>
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Case study: Deadly Start 2 High School

The ‘Deadly Start 2 High School’ transition program occurs in the Southern Adelaide Region of the Department of Education and Community Services. Recently, a total of 60 students from 13 primary schools and eight high schools were involved. Benefits for primary school students are better transition to high school, while high school students have an opportunity to act as mentors.

The program is designed to provide extra opportunities for students to step out of their comfort zones and get ready for change, in addition to the routine transition program. The program resulted from a network meeting of ACEOs (Aboriginal Community Education Officers) and AETs (Aboriginal Education Teachers). It was clear that a number of Year 7 students were disengaged from school and that in Year 8 the suspension rates were too high. The network believed improving transition from primary to high school would help.

The network clearly defined some aims and purposes and developed a program of workshops for students. The program is facilitated by a young Aboriginal woman who had been through the education system to university level.

Under ‘Deadly Start 2 High School’, schools have to make a commitment to get students and some of their staff to attend the workshops. The program was designed so students don’t miss large chunks of school and is as flexible as possible to cater for a range of sites. It is offered to schools without making huge demands on them.

One of the workers involved describes the program: ‘The workshops involve a lot of small group activities where the students talk about the things that are concerning them. They find that empowering. Then there are activities like ‘Rock and Water’, where students realise they are making choices about how they react in certain situations, and it really connects with them. We also ask them what worries them and what excites them about going to high school. And then in the final workshop (after the actual transition) we ask them for their recommendations.’

A complementary ‘Families as Career Partners’ program evolved partly because of the transition program. Its intention is to provide leadership and support to schools with secondary enrolments to achieve the goal that young Indigenous people in the Southern Adelaide Region have an increased capacity to make a successful transition through and from school to work and/or further learning.

Endnotes
1 This narrative is not intended to suggest that all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are developmentally vulnerable, the discussion is about general patterns revealed in various indicators.
2 For further detail see What Works Success in Remote Schools – www.whatworks.edu.au > Publications
5 For further detail see What Works Success in Remote Schools – www.whatworks.edu.au > Publications

References
The URLs for the following references and suggestions for further reading are listed in the electronic version of this paper available at www.whatworks.edu.au > Publications > Core Issues.


Further reading

Into Foundation Year


General transition


Secondary


Support materials


What Works. The Work Program

The What Works materials are based on a three part analysis of the way teachers and schools generally work to improve outcomes for Indigenous students.

Building awareness – Forming partnerships – Working systematically

The website (www.whatworks.edu.au) provides resources to support all of these.

The Workbook is the central support for targeted, systematic action.

The ‘School and Community: Working Together’ series supports the development of partnerships between schools and their Indigenous communities.

The ‘Core Issues’ series, includes

- **Core Issues 1: Setting Up For Success** suggests ways in which schools might best be set up to maximise success for Indigenous students.
- **Core Issues 2: Reducing Suspensions** explores positive alternatives to suspension and ways they can be implemented in schools.
- **Core Issues 3: Literacy** explores questions about what it means to develop genuinely effective literacy.
- **Core Issues 4: Numeracy** tackles important questions about the meaning and importance of numeracy.
- **Core Issues 5: Student Engagement** discusses attendance, participation and belonging.
- **Core Issues 6: Boarding** looks at current practice in this small but growing area of Indigenous education.
- **Core Issues 7: International Perspectives** is a report of the DEST/OECD seminar held in Cairns in 2007.
- **Core Issues 8: Education and Student Health: The Big Picture** looks at some of the health issues affecting Indigenous students and the part schools and teachers can play in dealing with them.
- **Core Issues 9: Using Data to Close the Gap** is designed to help build the capacity of schools to take action informed by evidence.
- **Core Issues 10: Using Personalised Learning Plans** aims to assist teachers and schools to deliver effective personalised learning to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students
- **Core Issues 11: Principals as Leaders in Literacy – A Strategy for Literacy Improvement in Primary Schools** Dr Munro discusses key questions that will help school leaders guide their students’ literacy learning and deliver well-planned professional learning for their teachers.
- **Core Issues 12: Improved Transition – Improved Outcomes** provides a general framework for schools to enhance the effectiveness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ key transitions.

All these and other print materials are available for download through the ‘Publications’ link on the website, where you can also sign up for What Works eNews, to keep in touch with the What Works project.

Experienced What Works consultants are available free of charge to work with schools on the materials.

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The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily represent the views of the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations.